Management Communication Quarterly
http://mcq.sagepub.com/

Helping Crisis Managers Protect Reputational Assets: Initial Tests of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory

W. Timothy Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay
Management Communication Quarterly 2002 16: 165
DOI: 10.1177/089331802237233

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://mcq.sagepub.com/content/16/2/165

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for *Management Communication Quarterly* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://mcq.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://mcq.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://mcq.sagepub.com/content/16/2/165.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Nov 1, 2002

What is This?

Downloaded from mcq.sagepub.com at LUND UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES on November 6, 2013

"Situational crisis communication theory . . . develops a prescriptive system for matching crisis response strategies to the crisis situation."

HELPING CRISIS MANAGERS PROTECT REPUTATIONAL ASSETS

Initial Tests of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory

W. TIMOTHY COOMBS
SHERRY J. HOLLADAY
Eastern Illinois University

AUTHORS' NOTE: An earlier version of this article was presented at the International Communication Association Convention, Washington, D.C., May 2001.

Management Communication Quarterly, Vol. 16, No. 2, November 2002 165-186
DOI: 10.1177/089331802237233
© 2002 Sage Publications

A situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), which articulates the variables, assumptions, and relationships that should be considered in selecting crisis response strategies to protect an organization's reputation, is advanced. Although various studies taking a situational approach have touched on certain of the theory's variables and relationships, this study represents the first attempt to articulate and begin to test a situational theory of crisis communication. SCCT is premised on matching the crisis response to the level of crisis responsibility attributed to a crisis. The study explores one of the basic assumptions of SCCT by assessing whether the predicted correlational relationship between crisis responsibility and organizational reputation occurs across a range of crisis types. Results support the theory's predictions and suggest ways to refine the theory.

The organization's reputation is widely recognized as a valued resource (Winkleman, 1999). Crises, or unpredictable events that can disrupt an organization's operations, threaten to damage organizational reputations. An organization's communicative response to a crisis can serve to limit and even to repair the reputational damage. Unfortunately, we have just begun to unpack how to use communicative responses to protect reputations.

Scholars frequently recommend highly accommodative strategies that feature apologies for the crisis (e.g., Benoit, 1995; Sellnow, Ulmer, & Snider, 1998). However, the universal application of highly accommodative strategies is problematic because of the legal and financial liabilities they incur. Apologies require an organization to publicly accept responsibility for a crisis, thereby weakening its legal position in the event of a lawsuit (Fitzpatrick, 1995; Tyler, 1997).

Needed is a situational approach to selecting crisis response strategies, that is, what an organization says and does after a crisis to protect the organizational reputation. Benson (1988) was the first to propose a situational approach. He challenged scholars to understand how the crisis type (or situation) influenced the selection of crisis response strategies. To meet this challenge, scholars must identify the range of possible crisis types and crisis responses and explain how crisis types affect the selection of crisis responses.

Some research has appeared that begins to expose how crisis type influences the effectiveness of crisis responses (e.g., Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1999b; Hearit, 1996).

The purpose of this article is to explain a comprehensive, prescriptive, situational approach for responding to crises and protecting the organizational reputation: the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT). SCCT is an extension of Coombs's (1995) previous research on matching crisis response strategies to the crisis situation, while also building on the work of other crisis management scholars. This article summarizes the research that led to the development of SCCT, articulates the central propositions of SCCT, and reports an initial test of a key proposition.

SCCT CONSTRUCTS AND ASSUMPTIONS

SCCT assumes that an organization's reputation, that is, how the organization is perceived by its publics, is a valued resource that is threatened by crises. A strategic communicative response can best protect the reputational resource by assessing the crisis situation and selecting a crisis response strategy that fits the crisis situation. Of course, there are concerns other than reputation to address in a crisis, particularly public safety. In fact, our research and that of others has suggested that providing instructing information, that is, what publics need to know and do to protect themselves from the crisis, is necessary before addressing reputational concerns (Coombs, 1999a; Coombs & Holladay, 2001; Sturges, 1994). However, the central focus of SCCT is how to manage organizational reputation during a crisis.

The crisis manager begins the selection of a crisis response strategy by identifying the crisis type, which we conceptualize as the frame that publics use to interpret the event. The objective is to evaluate the attributions of personal control, or the organization's ability to control the event, and crisis responsibility, or how much the organization is to blame for the event. Perceptions of crisis responsibility have proven to increase as attributions of personal control intensify (Coombs, 1998). In fact, personal control and crisis responsibility may be so highly correlated as to merit treating them

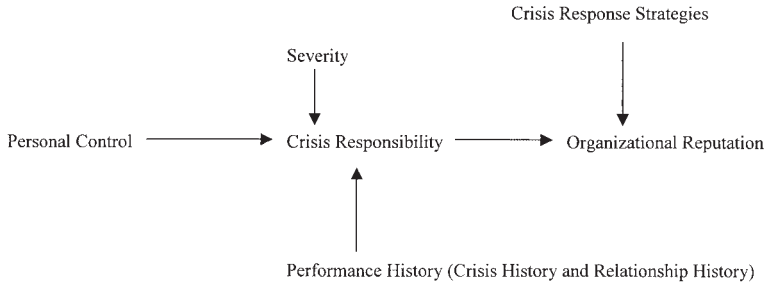

Figure 1: Variables and Relationships in the Situational Crisis Communication Theory

as essentially isomorphic. At any rate, the level of crisis responsibility is a key indicator of the potential reputational damage a crisis might inflict (Coombs & Schmidt, 2000).

The crisis manager should select a crisis response strategy that is appropriate for the amount of potential reputational damage a crisis may inflict. The stronger the potential reputational damage the more the crisis response strategy must try to accommodate the victim or victims, that is, those adversely affected by the crisis. Publics will expect an organization to do more for victims of the crisis when the organization is held more accountable for the crisis (Coombs, 1995). The crisis response strategies should then mitigate reputational damage by demonstrating that the organization cares for the victims and knows the proper way to behave, thereby meeting public expectations. In support of this claim, Coombs and Holladay (1996) found crisis response strategies to mitigate reputational damage in the case of organizational misdeeds. Figure 1 illustrates the predicted relationships among key variables in SCCT.

In assessing crisis types the crisis manager might consult a plethora of crisis typologies that have been created (e.g., Fearn-Banks, 1996; Lerbinger, 1997; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). These typologies attempt to categorize or differentiate the kinds of crises that organizations experience. Unfortunately, the typologies were created separately from typologies of crisis response strategies. This lack of integration prevents crisis managers from using the lists of crisis types to guide the choice of crisis response strategies. SCCT organizes the crisis types so that they can be integrated with crisis response strategies. In an attempt to integrate the multiple lists in

the literature, Coombs (1999b) developed a master list of nine crisis types that we have refined and extended for this study. Table 1 defines the various crisis types used in this study.

For this study, Coombs's (1999b) list was expanded to 13 to reflect two important variations in crises. First, accidents and product recalls were each further differentiated to reflect the fact that such crises may be caused either by technical breakdowns (e.g., equipment failures) or human breakdowns (e.g., errors). Several studies suggested that people will view human breakdowns as easier to prevent than technical breakdowns (Heath, 1994; Mitroff, Harrington, & Gai, 1996; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992). The second variation that led to our expanded list is a refinement of organizational misdeeds. This category covers a wide range of behaviors. Thus, three variations of misdeeds were included: (a) those involving injury, (b) those involving no injury, and (c) those involving a legal or regulatory violation (managerial misconduct).

Identifying the crisis type enables an initial assessment of the amount of crisis responsibility that publics will attribute to a crisis situation. Adjustments are then made to this initial assessment by considering two factors, severity and performance history. Severity is the amount of damage generated by a crisis including financial, human, and environmental damage. Performance history refers to the past actions or conduct of an organization including its crisis history (whether an organization has had previous crises) and relationship history (especially how well or poorly it has treated stakeholders). Severity and performance history have proven to modify perceptions of crisis responsibility for some crisis types (Coombs, 1998; Coombs & Holladay, 1996, 2001). As severity increases or performance history worsens publics will attribute greater crisis responsibility to the organization. Thus, SCCT suggests that initial assessments of crisis responsibility based on crisis type should be adjusted upward or downward depending on severity and/or performance history.

After assessing the level of crisis responsibility, crisis managers then choose a crisis response strategy appropriate to the level of crisis responsibility. Scholars have developed many lists of crisis response strategies; Coombs (1999b) synthesized these lists into eight crisis response strategies: (a) an attack on the accuser, in which the crisis manager confronts the group or person that claims a crisis

TABLE 1: 13 Crisis Types Used in the Study

1. Rumor: circulation of false information designed to harm an organization. Snapple facing a rumor that the ship on the label of its iced tea drink is a slave ship and that Snapple gives money to the Ku Klux Klan was used as the case.
2. Natural disaster: a naturally occurring event (an act of God) that damages an organization. A bank in Homestead, Florida slowly reestablishing operations after Hurricane Andrew was used as the case.
3. Malevolence/product tampering: damage by an external agent against an organization. The Sudafed tampering in Washington that killed two people was used as the case.
4. Workplace violence: an attack by an employee or former employee on current employees on the job. A shooting at the Radisson Bay Harbor Hotel Florida in which an employee shot five coworkers was used as the case.
5. Challenge: confrontation by disgruntled stakeholders claiming an organization is operating in an inappropriate manner. The American Family Association's (AFA) picketing of Waldenbooks was used as the case. The AFA maintained that Waldenbooks was a pornography peddler because it carried *Playboy* and art books containing nudity. AFA wanted all of these materials removed from the shelves of Waldenbooks.
6. Technical breakdown accident: an industrial accident caused by technology or equipment failure. The rupturing of an oil storage tank owned by Ashland Oil was used as the case. The rupture was caused by flaws in the steel that went unnoticed during normal inspections. The case notes that Ashland had no way of knowing about the flaws.
7. Technical breakdown product recall: the recall of a product because of technology or equipment failure. A recall of 70,000 television sets by Sharp was used as the case. The televisions became fire hazards over time as a faulty connector wore out. The faulty connector, provided by a supplier, was not discovered until the overheating problem emerged years later.
8. Megadamage: a technical breakdown accident that produces significant environmental damage. A 210,000-gallon oil spill in Galveston, Texas by Buffalo-Marine Service, Inc. was used as the case. One oil slick was over 5 miles long, and the spill posed a threat to sea birds living in nearby wetlands. The environmental damage dominates the interpretation of the crisis, not the fact that it is a technical breakdown accident.
9. Human breakdown accident: an industrial accident caused by human error. The explosion of a chemical storage tank at a Ford truck plant was used as the case. Workers accidentally hooked up a line delivering phosphoric acid to a tank holding sodium nitrate. The two solutions formed nitrous oxide and the pressure from the reaction blew the top off the tank, releasing a gas cloud. Even if environmental damage occurs, the human breakdown aspect of the accident becomes the defining feature of the crisis.
10. Human breakdown product recall: a product recall because of human error. A hamburger recall by Hudson Foods was used as the case. The beef became contaminated by *E. coli* when plant employees mistakenly placed contaminated beef back into the grinding process over a 3-day period. Their actions prompted the large product recall.
11. Organizational misdeeds with no injuries (to external stakeholders): management knowingly deceives stakeholders but without causing injury. Chrysler disconnecting odometers on test cars but not telling the buyers about the process was used as the case. Customers did not know the real mileage on the test cars nor did they know the cars had been driven hard test miles.
12. Organizational misdeed management misconduct: management knowingly violates laws or regulations. Astra Pharmaceutical's three top managers being found guilty of gross sexual harassment of female sales representatives was used as the case.

TABLE 1 (continued)

13. Organizational misdeeds with injuries (to external stakeholders): management knowingly places stakeholders at risk and some are injured. Morton Feedmills letting dog food be delivered that they knew contained small amounts of monensin, a poultry medication, was used as the case. Monensin is toxic to dogs. An investigative report found that managers allowed the shipments to occur, resulting in the nonfatal poisoning of a number of dogs.

exists; (b) denial, in which the crisis manager claims that there is no crisis; (c) excuse, in which the crisis manager attempts to minimize organizational responsibility for the crisis; (d) victimization, in which the crisis manager reminds stakeholders that the organization is a victim of the crisis as well; (e) justification, in which the crisis manager attempts to minimize the perceived damage inflicted by the crisis; (f) ingratiation, in which the crisis manager praises stakeholders and reminds them of the past good works done by the organization; (g) corrective action, in which the crisis manager tries to prevent a repeat of the crisis and/or repair the damage done by the crisis; and (h) full apology, in which the crisis manager publicly accepts responsibility for the crisis and requests forgiveness from the stakeholders.

The eight crisis response strategies can be ordered along a continuum ranging from defensive, putting organizational interests first, to accommodative, putting victim concerns first (Marcus & Goodman, 1991; Siomkos & Shrivastava, 1993). The defensive-accommodative continuum is adapted from the work of McLauglin, Cody, and O'Hair (1983), who used the continuum to conceptualize accounts, or explanations people offer for their untoward or negative behavior.

Using this continuum the crisis manager then matches the crisis response to level of crisis responsibility. The greater the crisis responsibility generated by the crisis the more accommodative the crisis response strategies must be. Following this principle should offer maximum protection for the organizational reputation. The very limited research thus far supports this recommendation (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000). Crises that prompt little to no attributions of organizational crisis responsibility, such as natural disasters, workplace violence, or rumors,

can be managed using just instructive information, telling people what to do to protect themselves from the crisis, as the crisis response. For rumors, crisis managers are recommended to add the denial crisis response strategy, the most defensive strategy. Crises that prompt moderate to low attributions of crisis responsibility, such as accidents, are effectively managed via moderately defensive crisis response strategies such as excuse. Crises with strong attributions of organizational crisis responsibility, such as organizational misdeeds, require strongly accommodative responses such as corrective action and full apologies (see Coombs, 1995 or 1999b, for a complete discussion of the matching process).

Extant research has tested some of the theory's claims using a limited range of crisis types. However, to refine the theory these claims need to be tested across a broader spectrum of crisis types and other claims need to be tested. The study reported here is a first step in that direction.

HYPOTHESIS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Previous research has treated personal control and crisis responsibility as two separate but related variables; that is, researchers have assumed that if an organization is perceived as being able to control a crisis, then it will be perceived to have more responsibility for that crisis (e.g., Coombs, 1998; Coombs & Holladay, 1996). However, it is conceivable that personal control and crisis responsibility, although conceptually distinct, may be indistinct in their operationalization or that measurements of the two variables may tap the same underlying variable. Measures typically used to assess personal control and crisis responsibility are derived from different scales, but it may be appropriate to combine them into one composite scale (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Griffin, Babin, & Darden, 1992; McAuley, Duncan, & Russell, 1992). Thus, our first research question is:

Research Question 1: Do the items for measuring personal control and crisis responsibility measure two separate factors or one common factor?

As we assess crisis types it is relevant to consider how these crisis types might be grouped into clusters of like crises. A basic assumption underlying much of crisis management planning is that "crises can be grouped according to their underlying structural similarity" (Mitroff, 1988, p. 16; see also Marcus & Goodman, 1991; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). Organizations can use the crisis clusters to construct crisis portfolios, that is, a crisis management plan for each cluster to which the organization is vulnerable. The rationale for clustering is that if an organization prepares a crisis plan for one crisis in the cluster, it is reasonably well prepared for all crisis types in that cluster (Mitroff, 1988; Mitroff et al., 1996). Crisis portfolios are efficient because an organization may not have the time to develop plans for every major crisis type and subvariation it may encounter.

Thus, it is worthwhile to explore how the crisis types in SCCT might be grouped into crisis clusters. Because crisis responsibility is central to assessing crisis types for the purpose of determining strategic responses, it should be used to form the crisis clusters. Thus, the second research question we pose is:

Research Question 2: What clusters will emerge from the 13 crisis types when crisis responsibility is used as the cluster factor?

The relationship between crisis responsibility and organizational reputation is critical to SCCT. SCCT prescribes that crisis managers utilize progressively more accommodative strategies as crisis responsibility increases, because perception of crisis responsibility is believed to be directly correlated to reputational damage. That is, as crisis responsibility increases, so does the reputational damage inflicted by a crisis. Research has found support for the crisis responsibility-reputation relationship among a limited subset of the crisis types (Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000). It is instructive to determine if the relationship is found across a wider array of crises. We would expect the relationship to exist in all of the crisis clusters discovered through Research Question 2.

Hypothesis 1: Observers rate an organization's reputation more negatively when they attribute greater amounts of crisis responsibility to the organization, regardless of the crisis cluster.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The respondents in this study were 130 undergraduate students enrolled in communication courses at a midwestern and a southeastern university. Of the respondents, 64% were women (n = 83) and 36% were men (n = 47). The respondents ranged in age from 18 to 54 years old (M = 21.8, SD = 5.40).

MEASURES

Three scales were employed in the study: Organizational Reputation, Personal Control, and Crisis Responsibility.

Organizational Reputation. Organizational Reputation was measured using five items from Coombs and Holladay's (1996) 10-item Organizational Reputation Scale, which is an adaptation of McCroskey's (1966) scale for measuring ethos. Specifically, an adaptation of the Character subscale of McCroskey's Ethos Scale was used to assess organizational reputation. Character is conceptualized as the trustworthiness and good will of the source, that is, an assessment of the degree to which the source is concerned with the interests of others. Coombs and Holladay (1996) modified McCroskey's items by simply replacing the term *speaker* with *organization*. The five items used in the present study were: (a) "The organization is concerned with the well-being of its publics," (b) "The organization is basically DISHONEST," (c) "I do NOT trust the organization to tell the truth about the incident," (d) "Under most circumstances, I would be likely to believe what the organization says," and (e) "The organization is NOT concerned with the well-being of its publics."

In previous research the 10-item version of the scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .82 (Coombs & Holladay, 1996) and .92 (Coombs, 1998). To reduce the length of the survey, five items were selected by reviewing previous research employing the Organizational Reputation Scale and selecting those items that produced a

Cronbach's alpha higher than .80. The five-item scale used in the present study had a Cronbach's alpha of .87.

CEOs rate trustworthiness as one of the most important aspects of an organizational reputation. Additionally, trustworthiness is a common factor used in the commercial reputational measures, including the reputational quotient (RQ), the most popular measure for corporations (Fombrun, 1996; Winkleman, 1999). In fact, trustworthiness is the primary construct tapped by the RQ. Hence, trustworthiness is a viable measure for reputation even though it is unidimensional.

Personal Control. Personal control refers to the degree to which an event is controllable or uncontrollable by the organization. It was measured using four items inspired by the Causal Dimension Scale II (CDSII) (McAuley et al., 1992). The items are: (a) "The cause of the crisis was something the organization could control," (b) "The cause of the crisis is something over which the organization had no power," (c) "The cause of the crisis is something that was manageable by the organization," and (d) "The cause of the crisis is something over which the organization had power." Three previous studies have used this scale and reported Cronbach alphas of .84 to .89 (Coombs, 1998, 1999a; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000). The Personal Control scale in the present study had a Cronbach's alpha of .88.

Crisis Responsibility. Crisis responsibility was measured using Griffin, Babin, and Darden's (1992) three-item scale for Blame. The three items were: (a) "Circumstances, not the organization, are responsible for the crisis," (b) "The blame for the crisis lies with the organization," and (c) "The blame for the crisis lies in the circumstances, not the organization." Three crisis studies have used the three-item Blame scale, with Cronbach alphas ranging from .80 to .86 (Coombs, 1998, 1999a; Coombs & Holladay, 2001). The Crisis Responsibility scale in the present study had a Cronbach's alpha of .91.

The instrument also included four other items that were to be used in a later study. The anchors for the Personal Control scale were 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*). All other items had anchors of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

STIMULUS

A total of 13 crisis cases were selected for the study, one for each crisis type listed in Table 1. All crises were based on actual events and used the real organizations' names as well as descriptions of the crises provided by news reports.

PROCEDURES

Each respondent received a packet containing a cover page with directions, two stimulus crisis cases, and two copies of the survey instrument. The order of the materials in the packet was cover page, first stimulus, first copy of survey instrument, second stimulus, and second copy of the survey instrument. Each respondent read the first stimulus and completed the first copy of the survey, then read the second stimulus and completed the second copy of the survey instrument. The two cases were randomly paired and then placed in the packet. Respondents were verbally instructed to read carefully each case and then respond to the questions following the case. The administration required about 15 to 20 minutes.

RESULTS

Research Question 1, focusing on the possible isomorphic relationships between personal control and crisis responsibility, was explored using factor analysis. A principle components analysis with varimax rotation was run using the items from the Personal Control and Crisis Responsibility scales. Only one item had an eigenvalue of over 1, so no rotation was needed. The results are presented in Table 2. The single factor had an eigenvalue of 4.79 and accounted for 67.98% of the variance. The results indicate that the Personal Control and Crisis Responsibility scales seem to measure the same factor. The two scales were combined to form a composite score that will be referred to subsequently as Crisis Responsibility. The Cronbach's alpha for the new scale was .90. The new Crisis

TABLE 2: Factor Analysis for Personal Control and Crisis Responsibility Items

Item	*Factor Loading*
Personal Control 1	.89
Personal Control 2	.83
Personal Control 3	.75
Personal Control 4	.83
Crisis Responsibility 1	.86
Crisis Responsibility 2	.83
Crisis Responsibility 3	.85

Responsibility scale was used in subsequent analyses in place of the Personal Control and Crisis Responsibility composite scores.

Research Question 2, focusing on the groupings of crisis types, was explored using hierarchical cluster analysis, an exploratory method for discovering relatively homogeneous clusters of cases based on some measured characteristics. It sorts cases, in this study crisis types, into groups or clusters so that the degree of association is stronger between members of the same cluster and weaker between members of different clusters. A successful hierarchical cluster analysis requires two important decisions: (a) identifying variables used to create the clusters and (b) selecting a method for determining the optimum number of clusters. Crisis Responsibility was the variable used to create the crisis clusters because it is central to SCCT. Crisis Responsibility and Organizational Reputation scores were selected as the basis for evaluating the optimum number of clusters. One-way ANOVAs were used to determine the optimum number of crisis clusters. The best fit occurred when the clusters were shown to be distinct from one another when compared on the Crisis Responsibility and Organizational Reputation variables.

The cluster analysis found a four-cluster solution after two stages and a three-cluster solution after three stages. The crisis types in each cluster were combined to create cluster scores, then a series of one-way ANOVAs was used to determine which cluster solution created a best fit. Table 3 provides the results of the one-way ANOVA analyses. The three-cluster solution seemed to best represent the data in that the clusters were all significantly different from one another on their scores for Crisis Responsibility and Organizational Reputation; this was not the case in the four-cluster

TABLE 3: One-Way ANOVA Results for Crisis Clusters and Situation Crisis Communication Theory Variables

	Four-Cluster Solution										
	Natural Disaster				*Workplace Violence*						
	Accidental		*Preventable*		*Rumor*		*Product Tampering*				
Variable	*Mean*	SD	*Mean*	SD	*Mean*	SD	*Mean*	SD	F	df	p
Organizational Reputation	3.68[a]	0.84	2.99[b]	0.90	4.35[c]	0.58	3.90[c]	0.80	74.88	3,256	.001
Crisis Responsibility	4.24[a]	1.28	5.43[b]	1.24	2.55[c]	1.13	2.74[c]	1.27	30.54	3,256	.001

	Three-Cluster Solution									
	Accidental		*Preventable*		*Victim*					
	Mean	SD	*Mean*	SD	*Mean*	SD				
Crisis Responsibility	4.24[a]	1.28	5.43[b]	1.24	2.66[c]	1.21			112.31	2,257	.001
Organizational Reputation	3.67[a]	0.84	2.99[b]	0.90	4.10[c]	0.74			41.69	2,257	.001

NOTE: For each test, means superscripted a, b, and c are significantly different using Dunnett C procedure, $p < .01$.

solution. Hence, the 13 crisis types can be reduced to three crisis clusters: the victim cluster, the accidental cluster, and the preventable cluster.

In all of the crisis types within the victim cluster the organization is a victim of the crisis along with the stakeholders. This cluster includes natural disasters, rumors, workplace violence, and product tampering. These are crisis types that produce minimal attributions of crisis responsibility.

The second cluster was called accidental because all of the crises represent unintentional actions by the organization; that is, the organizations did not intend to create the crises. The accidental cluster includes challenges, megadamage, technical breakdown–accidents, and technical breakdown–recalls, that is, crisis types that produce moderate attributions of crisis responsibility.

The third cluster was called preventable because the crises involved either purposefully placing stakeholders at risk, or knowingly taking inappropriate actions, or human error that might have or could have been avoided. The preventable cluster includes human breakdown accidents, human breakdown recalls, organizational misdeeds–management misconduct, organizational misdeed with no injuries, and organizational misdeeds with injuries, the crisis types that produce strong attributions of crisis responsibility.

Hypothesis 1, focusing on the relationship between Crisis Responsibility and Organizational Reputation, was tested using Pearson correlation analysis. The Crisis Responsibility and Organizational Reputation variables were correlated separately for each of the three crisis clusters. The correlations were significant in all three clusters: $r = -.51$ ($p < .01$) in the victim cluster, $r = -.32$ ($p < .01$) in the accident cluster, and $r = -.46$ ($p < .01$) in the preventable cluster. The results thus support Hypothesis 1.

DISCUSSION

An organization's reputation is a valuable resource that should be protected from the threats posed by a crisis (Barton, 2001). SCCT offers a set of principles that guide the selection of crisis response strategies in order to maximize reputational protection.

SCCT provides crisis managers with guidelines for understanding which crisis response strategies are most appropriate for a given crisis type (Coombs, 1995). Efforts to refine SCCT and to examine a key assumption were tested in this study.

Using crisis responsibility to form crisis clusters, that is, groupings of similar crisis types, refined thinking about crisis types. Developing crisis clusters is premised on the logic of crisis portfolios: Similar crises can be managed in similar fashions (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). Because crisis types within each crisis cluster will produce similar attributions of crisis responsibility, crisis managers can use similar crisis response strategies to address crisis types within the same cluster. Thirteen crisis types formed three distinct clusters: the victim cluster, the accidental cluster, and the preventable cluster. The victim cluster involves crisis types in which harm is inflicted on the organization as well as on stakeholders. The accidental cluster involves unintentional actions by an organization. In these crisis types the organization does not intend for the crisis to occur; rather, the crisis situation results from a danger associated with the organization's operation. The preventable cluster, on the other hand, involves intentionally placing stakeholders at risk, knowingly violating laws or regulations, or not doing enough to prevent an accident or a defective product from reaching the market.

Identifying the crisis type or placing an event in a crisis cluster is the initial step in assessing crisis responsibility. The severity and performance history factors must be considered as well. For example, repeated or severe technical breakdown accidents should perhaps be treated more like the preventable cluster than the accident cluster. SCCT recommends that severity and performance history factors be considered as part of the crisis responsibility adjustment process.

One additional point should be made about recalls and product tampering crisis types, because they have a unique dynamic. Obviously, recalls and product tampering will involve the corrective action crisis response strategy, as the dangerous product must be removed from the market. SCCT should be utilized to determine what crisis response strategies to use in combination with the requisite corrective action.

The model of SCCT presented in Figure 1 was made more parsimonious by combining Personal Control and Crisis Responsibility.

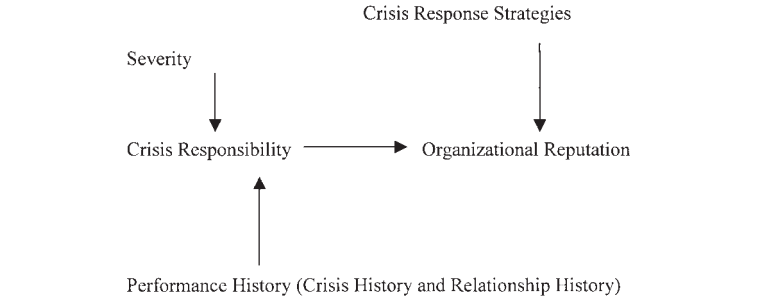

Figure 2: Revised Model of Situational Crisis Communication Theory

The factor analysis results indicate the two scales were measuring the same factor. To retain the original language of SCCT, Personal Control and Crisis Responsibility were collapsed into one variable called Crisis Responsibility. Figure 2 is a revised model for SCCT.

The key assumption tested is that the relationship between crisis responsibility and organizational reputation occurs across a range of crisis types. The matching process of SCCT is premised on the relationship between these two variables. Testing Hypothesis 1 found that a moderate correlation existed between crisis responsibility and organizational reputation in all three crisis clusters. The results suggest that this central relationship in SCCT can be applied to all of the crisis clusters and is not limited to the organization misdeed crisis types examined in earlier research (Coombs & Holladay, 1996, 2001; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000).

LIMITATIONS

This study suffers from the limitations common to any study using an experimental method and a student population. Although the crisis events were real, respondents experienced the crises in an artificial manner and not all the factors relevant to crisis management could be assessed. Furthermore, students are not the typical targets for crisis communication. However, previous crisis communication research has found no differences in responses between student populations and nonstudent populations (Coombs, 1999a). Moreover, students are and will continue to be stakeholders for many organizations.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Research should begin to assess how people perceive the various crisis response strategies. Researchers have arrayed crisis response strategies from defensive to accommodative. Do stakeholders perceive crisis response strategies the way researchers believe they will? Such research adopts a receiver perspective to understand how people interpret crisis response strategies. Again, we must make sure that our assumptions are accurate if we are using the assumptions to recommend plans of action for crisis managers.

The results of Research Question 2 provide a solid base for making initial crisis responsibility assessments. The attributions of crisis responsibility for the crisis types and the crisis clusters provide useful initial estimates that crisis managers can use to guide their strategic selection of crisis response strategies. Future research must unpack if the anticipated modifying effects of severity and performance history are found across the spectrum of crisis types and clusters. Currently, only technical breakdown accidents, human error accidents, and organizational misdeed management misconduct have been used to test the modifying effects of severity and performance history (Coombs & Holladay, 1996, 2001, in press). One question to ask would be, "Do severity and performance history (crisis history and relationship history) have the same effects on all crisis types in a crisis cluster?"

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

The SCCT is an attempt to provide crisis managers with a resource for making informed decisions concerning ways to protect the organizational reputation during a crisis. First, the identification of attributions of crisis responsibility for crisis types and the formation of crisis clusters help crisis managers with their initial assessment of crisis responsibility. Crisis managers can estimate the level of crisis responsibility their crisis will generate among publics by identifying the crisis type they face or by placing their crisis in the appropriate crisis cluster. Once estimated, the level of crisis responsibility serves to narrow the selection of viable crisis response strategies. That is, crisis managers can make a more

informed choice about which crisis response strategies to employ. Combined with the results of this study, crisis managers may use Coombs's (1995) decision flowchart to help select the appropriate crisis response strategy for each crisis cluster.

Second, the research found that the crisis responsibility–reputation relationships occurred across a variety of crises. Because this relationship is the foundation for the SCCT crisis response strategy selection guidelines, crisis managers can place greater faith in the SCCT guidelines.

Third, crisis managers have better insight into variations of accident, recall, and organizational misdeed crisis types. For accidents and recalls the distinction between technical and human breakdowns is critical. Based on the results of the cluster analysis in this study, it is apparent that stakeholders attribute much less crisis responsibility to technical breakdown accidents and recalls than human breakdown accidents and recalls. If the accident or recall has its origins in a human breakdown, crisis managers must utilize more accommodative strategies than for those with a technical breakdown origin.

On the other hand, no differences were found in how people perceive the three variations of organizational misdeeds in terms of crisis responsibility or organizational reputation. This suggests that any organizational misdeed must be treated seriously, and SCCT recommends that highly accommodative crisis response strategies, such as apology or corrective action, should be used.

CONCLUSION

Organizational reputations matter, and crises threaten organizational reputations. Thus, crisis managers should make protecting the organizational reputation a central focus of their work. SCCT offers a way to explain and to practice organizational reputation protection during a crisis. SCCT models the crisis process in terms of crisis responsibility and organizational reputation and develops a prescriptive system for matching crisis response strategies to the crisis type. This study is the first in a series designed to test and to refine SCCT. The study validated a key assumption in SCCT and

provided crisis managers with a basis for making more informed choices of crisis response strategies in accidents, recalls, and organizational misdeed crises.

REFERENCES

Barton, L. (2001). *Crisis in organizations II* (2nd ed.). Cincinnati, OH: College Divisions South-Western.

Benoit, W. L. (1995). *Accounts, excuses, and apologies: A theory of image restoration*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Benson, J. A. (1988). Crisis revisited: An analysis of the strategies used by Tylenol in the second tampering episode. *Central States Speech Journal*, *38*, 49-66.

Coombs, W. T. (1995). Choosing the right words: The development of guidelines for the selection of the "appropriate" crisis response strategies. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *8*, 447-476.

Coombs, W. T. (1998). An analytic framework for crisis situations: Better responses from a better understanding of the situation. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *10*, 177-191.

Coombs, W. T. (1999a). Information and compassion in crisis responses: A test of their effects. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *11*, 125-142.

Coombs, W. T. (1999b). *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (1996). Communication and attributions in a crisis: An experimental study of crisis communication. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *8*, 279-295.

Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2001). An extended examination of the crisis situation: A fusion of the relational management and symbolic approaches. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *13*, 321-340.

Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (in press). Matching crisis response strategies to crisis situations: An attribution theory-based approach to crisis management. In D. P. Millar & R. Heath (Eds.), *Crisis communication: Theory and applications*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Coombs, W. T., & Schmidt, L. (2000). An empirical analysis of image restoration: Texaco's racism crisis. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *12*, 163-178.

Fearn-Banks, K. (1996). *Crisis communications: A casebook approach*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Fitzpatrick, K. R. (1995). Ten guidelines for reducing legal risks in crisis management. *Public Relations Quarterly*, *40*(2), 33-38.

Fombrun, C. J. (1996). *Reputation: Realizing value from the corporate image*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Griffin, M., Babin, B. J., & Darden, W. R. (1992). Consumer assessments of responsibility for product-related injuries: The impact of regulations, warnings, and promotional policies. *Advances in Consumer Research*, *19*, 870-877.

Hearit, K. M. (1996, Fall). The use of counter-attack in apologetic public relations crises: The case of General Motors vs. Dateline NBC. *Public Relations Review*, *22*(3), 233-248.

Heath, R. L. (1994). *Management of corporate communication: From interpersonal contacts to external affairs*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Lerbinger, O. (1997). *The crisis manager: Facing risk and responsibility*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Marcus, A. A., & Goodman, R. S. (1991). Victims and shareholders: The dilemmas of presenting corporate policy during a crisis. *Academy of Management Journal*, *34*, 281-305.

McAuley, E., Duncan, T. E., & Russell, D. W. (1992). Measuring causal attributions: The revised Causal Dimension Scale (CDII). *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *18*, 566-573.

McCroskey, J. C. (1966). *An introduction to rhetorical communication*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

McLauglin, M. L., Cody, M. J., & O'Hair, H. D. (1983). The management of failure events: Some contextual determinants of accounting behavior. *Human Communication Research*, *9*, 208-224.

Mitroff, I. I. (1988, Winter). Crisis management: Cutting through the confusion. *Sloan Management Review*, *29*, 15-20.

Mitroff, I. I., Harrington, K., & Gai, E. (1996, September). Thinking about the unthinkable. *Across the Board*, *33*(8), 44-48.

Pauchant, T. C., & Mitroff, I. I. (1992). *Transforming the crisis-prone organization: Preventing individual, organizational, and environmental tragedies*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Pearson, C. M., & Mitroff, I. I. (1993). From crisis prone to crisis prepared: A framework for crisis management. *The Executive*, *7*, 48-59.

Sellnow, T. L., Ulmer, R. R., & Snider, M. (1998). The compatibility of corrective action in organizational crisis communication. *Communication Quarterly*, *46*, 60-74.

Siomkos, G., & Shrivastava, P. (1993). Responding to product liability crises. *Long Range Planning*, *26*(5), 72-79.

Sturges, D. L. (1994). Communicating through crisis: A strategy for organizational survival. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *7*, 297-316.

Tyler, L. (1997). Liability means never being able to say you're sorry: Corporate guilt, legal constraints, and defensiveness in corporate communication. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *11*, 51-73.

Winkleman, S. (1999, April). The right stuff. *Chief Executive*, *143*, 80-81.

Timothy W. Coombs (Ph.D., Purdue University) teaches at Eastern Illinois University and is a consultant for Communication Resources Northwest. His work in crisis management and business continuity has appeared in a variety of academic and professional journals. His main area of research is crisis management/communication. He is the author of the award-winning book Ongoing Crisis Communication.

Sherry J. Holladay is an associate professor at Eastern Illinois University, Charleston. Her research interests include crisis communication, leadership, and aging employees. Her work has appeared in Management Communication Quarterly, Journal of Public Relations Research, *and* International Journal of Aging and Human Development.